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# Implementing the requirements of SENDA in Aston University Library & Information Services

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This article aims to share how the changes presented by SENDA legislation<sup>1</sup> were implemented at Aston University in the context of Library & Information Services. It is the intention to share experiences, both good and bad, for the benefit of colleagues currently undergoing the process. Aspects covered include the realisation of a need for change, and the subsequent processes of implementation. Methods employed to motivate library staff to buy into the changes are also explored. A description of some of the changes that have been accomplished is given, together with an indication of some of the projects that proved to be too costly, and the article finishes with the situation as it stands today.

## **STARTING POINTS**

While the major impetus for change at Aston stemmed from the impending SENDA legislation<sup>1</sup>,

there was also a feeling that facilities and services needed to be improved even if the legislation had not been in existence. Although some limited improvements had been made (for instance an accessible toilet had been installed), the library at Aston University was nearly thirty years old and generally the building was not very user-friendly for the physically disabled. Also services had not yet been reviewed to take account of additional needs issues.

The disability adviser for the university took the initiative to make the initial contact with the director of library and information services, and he invited her to a meeting. This proved to be a good approach as it was much better than relying on just memos/email communication. The face-to-face contact gave the opportunity to discuss issues and raise concerns (such as lack of funding or what could be considered 'reasonable' adjustments). It also helped to establish a good working relationship with the advisor, and she made it clear that the library would be given active support. It was very reassuring to see that the adviser took a proactive but pragmatic approach.

## **FIRST STEPS**

There was already a culture in the library of process improvement via a number of groups. These had evolved out of the theory of 'quality circles'<sup>2</sup>, prevalent in the 1990s<sup>3</sup>. This was a useful starting point for Aston but the same approach could work elsewhere by setting up a task force or working group.

The role of coordinating the implementation of SENDA was given to the existing group responsible for developing public services within the library. While the group approach can be slower, the benefit was being able to take a collective view, and to brainstorm. One or two people working together might have missed some key issues.

The task was split into the three areas that were thought most likely to affect students. The disability adviser had reported that dyslexia was the most common additional need at Aston. Out of a student population at Aston of around 6000, about 150 students would have the condition, although not all would have declared themselves as such. A sub-group was therefore set up to concentrate on services to students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties. The other two main areas that were looked at by sub-groups were visual impairment and mobility, and the deaf and hard of hearing.

Being library staff, it felt natural to start by finding background reading and information. Although there was quite a lot of information available, there were no guidelines as such for university libraries at that time, as these were still in the process of being developed. These would have been very useful to have had, and those that have subsequently been drawn up, have been used retrospectively as a checklist at Aston<sup>4</sup>.

While there are a plethora of courses now on this subject, at the time there was not so much available. However some very useful courses were attended including one on dyslexia at Bristol University, which helped a lot with planning suitable provision. Contact was also made with Birmingham Public Library at Chamberlain Square, which had been involved in provision for several years. Library staff involved in the sub-groups visited the Central Library in Birmingham to assess the equipment that they had acquired and talk to their staff. Although their circumstances as a public library did not exactly match those of Aston as an academic library, their experience was still valuable, and the visit helped to maintain staff motivation.

#### **FINDING MOTIVATORS**

The two main ways used to motivate staff during this period of change were 'communication' and 'involvement'. A basic 'awareness and review of legislation' session was held for all staff just after the group started work. This was so everyone would have some awareness of what was happening, and what would be expected of the library in terms of the legislation. A second session was held a few months later where plans for implementation were outlined. This gave people the chance to comment on these plans, and suggest other ideas. A third session was held (repeated to take account of different shift patterns) just before the beginning of the autumn term when the first stage of improvements had been implemented. This enabled staff to be fully aware of the new services and to be ready to support the customers effectively.

A further factor that influenced motivation was that although there were only seven staff on the Process Improvement Group charged with taking this forward, they were broadly representative of all areas of the library service, and as they talked about their work with other staff in their areas, this allowed the plans to spread further and was a natural way of gaining support for the changes. It

helped too that libraries by their very nature have strong cultures of customer service.

In trying to implement the necessary changes, it became important to understand that some solutions can present problems to those who have to implement them. For example it was suggested that students with additional needs be granted automatic extended loans. This was not an unreasonable proposal, though doing so involved much thought. It might have looked a simple request to an outsider, but it was not so in practice, requiring further integration of the university student records system with the library management system, and raising issues relating to ownership and access to information and issues of student confidentiality, etc. It is important to realise that when staff appear to be resistant, rather than being purely unwilling to change, it might be that they have genuine concerns about how to achieve a really effective solution.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

The library at Aston has actually done quite a lot of small improvements which incrementally have made a big difference to the library users that need them. Implications of the legislation and offering an inclusive service were considered for all areas of the service and compromise has been sought wherever cost or other obstacles have prevented reaching the optimum solution. Only some examples of the improvements have been included here<sup>5</sup>:

- *Access to the building itself*

The building was unsuited to library users with various additional needs but an accessible toilet had been installed and the goods lift was being made available to those who needed it. Most of the access issues were covered by the estates audit and solutions were commissioned by them e.g. fitting audio and low level tactile buttons to the lift etc. However their plans did not include replacing the heavy glass entrance doors to the library. Although estates had not prioritised this, the library remained convinced that it was a problem, and so challenged this decision. Facing further resistance, rather than simply accepting this, an alternative low cost solution was identified. This was to install an intercom from outside the library entrance to enable library users to call for support from library staff. This approach provided us with a solution for the eighteen months or so until the doors could be automated.

- **Service points**  
All the service points have now been fitted with hearing loops. Library staff who work at any of these points are trained to be able to alert library users of any relevant services available to meet their additional needs. The service counter is at standing height and could not be easily adapted for the needs of wheel chair users. The solution here was to allow loans to be made at our general enquiries point, located at the end of our service counter, as staff could slip out from behind the desk more easily, in order to help the user.
- **Study arrangements**  
Three small lockable study carrels have been made available which can be booked in advance or on the day. A large study room has also been established, providing a height adjustable table, assistive software to help with dyslexia and visual impairment, a white board, a day light lamp and a CCTV magnifier. As some students prefer to use more mainstream facilities, a computer on a height adjustable desk has also been made available in one of the main computing labs in the library. A high level desk with a draughtsman chair has provided an alternative working space for students with back problems.
- **Extended loans**  
All students with declared additional needs of any kind automatically qualify for extended loans and postal loans, telephone and web renewals, etc. Library staff will also fetch materials from the shelves if the student is unable to do this unaided and does not have a support worker with them.
- **Photocopying**  
Library staff will assist with photocopying, if people with a disability have no support worker. Alternatively, they can make use of the serviced photocopying service at the same rate as self-service. Serviced copying is usually slightly dearer to allow for the additional administration costs. Students with dyslexia and/or visual impairment can also request coloured paper to use in the photocopiers if that assists their reading.
- **Computing**  
The library has made available two large 19" computer screens, wireless headphones, and scanners etc. in the large study room. Software such as TextHelp Read and Write (to help with dyslexia) and Dolphin Supernova

(to support the partially sighted) are available on these computers and the Kurzweil 1000 software is due to be installed soon, following a successful bid to the university for funding.

- **Other equipment**  
The library has invested in a range of assistive equipment which can be used in the designated study room or borrowed for use in the library. This includes a CCTV Alladin magnifier, assorted hand-held magnifiers, audio cassette player, daylight and angle-poise lamp, closed caption decoder video player, and coloured overlays.
- **Documentation**  
Leaflets and other literature is routinely made available on the Web so that it can be accessed using a screen reader. The main leaflets are recorded on audiotape and are available to be borrowed. The rest of the leaflets can be made available in this format on request, but they can also be supplied as enlarged copies or on disc, etc. Currently, investigations are being made into costs of making British sign language video versions. The library house style for documentation and publicity is designed to be as accessible as possible and, for example, requires the use of non-serif fonts of a reasonable size, using left justification only, etc. The library web pages are awaiting a new university-wide content management system to make them more compliant.
- **Information skills training**  
The training suite in the library at Aston is entirely accessible for wheelchairs and has been equipped with hearing loops in each of the two teaching rooms, and an additional VDU is available for use with overhead projection. Teaching materials can be made available on coloured paper, in enlarged format, or on disk etc. as preferred by the individual. Library staff make a conscious effort to find out in advance if there are any students attending who have particular needs.

#### **COST BARRIERS**

Inevitably there are some developments that exceeded the funds available. For example, the ideal would be to provide proper, readily accessible public lifts in the building but this has so far proved too expensive. Nevertheless, we are seek-

ing some sort of compromise, by seeking to make the existing lift which is just inside the staff area more directly accessible.

Initially (as mentioned earlier) the entrance doors were not scheduled by estates for replacement and the library could not afford to do this, but now the existing doors are in the process of being automated.

Ideally too, the assistive software, especially the TextHelp, would have been available on all the PCs but the licence costs were prohibitive. Also, some of the software options that were reviewed proved too expensive. Our rationale behind purchasing the software was to weigh up the relative merits of purchasing the software most commonly used by students against the licensing and purchase costs.

Another project that proved to be too expensive was to automatically have all leaflets available immediately in all formats (e.g. as audio, braille, BSL video etc.). Our compromise was to have the key ones ('Library factsheet' and 'Services to library users with additional needs') readily available, but reacting to requests for others. As these leaflets change at least once a year, the cost of producing all the leaflets would be ongoing and not a one-off cost.

It was identified quite early on that low level shelving would be the ideal, but this would have been very costly to implement across the board. The solution at the moment is that whenever shelving is replaced, low level shelving is being bought. However, this is more than simply a question of money. As part of our interim solution, it had been hoped to avoid using the top and bottom shelves of the existing taller shelving, but this created a problem of insufficient space.

#### **CURRENT POSITION**

A thorough review has recently been undertaken of all the original proposals and those which had arisen since. It appears that quite a lot has been achieved but more needs to be done. A few issues are outstanding from the original plans, especially where the work is dependent on the estates work plan etc., but a few had slipped through the net and other things have arisen since. The items identified by the progress review are now being worked on and they include: a review of the variety of seating required; work on web page compliance; making more links to web sites of relevance and addresses of bodies like RNIB, RNID, etc. available on our website; a review of

our lift provision and access to our goods lift; and purchase of additional equipment like alternative mice, keyboard enhancers, etc.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

Consultation with library users with different additional needs has been found to be invaluable. It is too easy to second guess what might be a suitable solution to ensuring access, only to find that this is far from the optimum one. And while some mistakes are easily resolved, others can prove very costly in terms of both outlay and staff time.

The other main thing that has been learnt by those implementing these changes at Aston is that this is not a task that can ever be truly finished. There is always more that can be done to improve library services and indeed this is the duty of the service provider under the SENDA legislation. The law itself requires constant improvement of services, as what might originally have been an unreasonable adjustment may later be quite feasible. Of course, the law is only one part of the equation: if the motivation is to offer an equality of service to all our library users, continuous improvement is essential anyway.

It is the experience of staff at Aston that it is often the case that to improve services for students with additional needs, services are improved for all. Changes need to be embedded in the mainstream practices of the library rather than be seen as an add-on to cater for specific groups.

However, from time to time there can be some conflicts of interest between serving one group of library users and another. In this type of scenario, there is a need to balance the requirements of the groups. It may be that this is an unreasonable adjustment and that majority needs may have to prevail. This can be the conflicting needs of groups of library users with different additional needs, just as much as between students with additional needs and the rest of the student population. The constraints of physical premises and the funding available also have to play a role in what can be deemed a reasonable adjustment at a particular moment in time. However, an alternative or compromise approach can often turn the situation into a win-win scenario.

#### **REFERENCES**

- 1 Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001. London: HMSO, 2001. Available at <http://www.hms.gov.uk/acts/acts2001/20010010.htm>

- 2 'A Quality Circle is a small group of between three and twelve people who do the same or similar work, voluntarily meeting together regularly for about one hour per week in paid time, usually under the leadership of their own supervisor, and trained to identify analyse and solve some of the problems in their work, presenting solutions to management and, where possible, implementing solutions themselves.' [D.Hutchins, *Quality circles handbook*, London: Pitman, 1985]
- 3 G. Speakman, 'Why not consider quality circles?', *Library management*, 12 (3), 1991.
- 4 Disability Rights Commission, *Libraries and learning centres: good practice guide: The Disability Discrimination Act Part 4, EDU 14*, 2002. Available at <http://www.drcgb.org/publicationsandreports/publicationdetails.asp?id=203&section=ed>
- 5 For more details of services offered to students with additional needs by Aston University, please visit our web site at <http://www.aston.ac.uk/lis/studentinfo/addneeds.jsp>
- 6 Websites that proved useful:

*Hearing Concern*

Provides support for hard of hearing adults in the UK  
<http://www.hearingconcern.com/>

*Revealweb*

A web based catalogue of available titles, in an accessible formats from a range of organisations, for visually impaired people and their intermediaries  
<http://www.revealweb.org.uk/>

*RNID for deaf and hard of hearing people*

<http://www.rnid.org.uk/>

*Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities*

<http://www.skill.org.uk/>

*TechDis Service*

A JISC-sponsored service which aims to improve services to disabled students and staff in further, higher and specialist education through technology  
<http://www.techdis.ac.uk/>